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Interview with Phil Pierce and Eric Springer

Kristin Kvernland

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Researcher's name: Kristin Kvernland

Event: Interview with Phil Pearce and Eric Springer

Place: Farmer's Cooperative, 502 West Gambier Street, Mt. Vernon, OH, 43050

Co-workers present: None

KK: Ok this is Kristin Kvernland and today is February first, 2007 and I am interviewing Mr. Phil Pearce and Mr...

ES: Eric Springer

KK: Eric Springer, about the economics of farming. [Noise of the recorder hitting the desk] Ok, so my first question is just sort of how, what is the history of the Co-op and why did that start up?

PP: Actually this Co-op started back in the late 1900s and it was just formed so that farmers could buy quantity, buy in quantity, and then divvy it out and not have to have the large scale farms because back then they did not have the large scale farms to get by on discounts so they just pooled all their orders together and then they, they'd come in to get their products.

KK: Ok, and were they using that for food or feed or...

PP: At that time it was any of their inputs their feeds, feed stuff or their seed or back then of course they didn't use chemicals...

KK: Ok, um and then, I know this is sort of a naïve question but how exactly are the prices set when, if I'm a farmer and I come in and I have things to sell how is that determined? [Noise of paper hitting desk]

PP: Ok, with the, with their commodities that they're selling back to us, its set basically by the Chicago, Chicago board of trade when they trade and see what other companies are wanting to pay for stuff.

KK: ok

PP: And then they, we come in and we bill under the Chicago board of trade because you've got to allow for transportations to get it to a, a big terminal or a or a dock to put it on a ship to ship it out.

KK: And then generally does that stay within the US or, what is bought and sold, or and go into like products that you'd eventually find in the grocery store or is that?

PP: Actually the majority of the stuff that comes through this mill right here will end up either in dog food or as livestock feed. And that, that could be anywhere down in the Carolinas. We sell a lot of stuff and we ship it out by rail.

KK: So, I, I guess as a middle person, do you, is a price a farmer gets then lower than if they were to sell directly but then they would have to pay for transport?

PP: Right, they'd have to pay to get it to wherever a direct shipment place would be.

KK: ok

PP: But they still wouldn't get the, the Chicago board 'cause they always allow for more freight to get it to wherever it's going.

KK: ok.

ES: Plus there's a license in their somewhere.

PP: lot's of licenses

ES: There's licenses so a farmer really couldn't sell direct.

KK: ok. um, ok so I was talking to Mr. McCutcheon from the um extension office earlier and he was saying how Knox County is a really diverse place in terms of the type of farmers that they have [Noise of shuffling papers on desk] it's not really just like all really big farms or all just like really tiny farms, it's sort of a mix of the two. Um so I was just wondering what type of farmers um sell to, or come to the Co-op is it people that have very big operations or what kind of crops would they, would they be in one crop or multiple crops or...

PP: They're all in multiple crops whether they're a small farm or they're a large farm but for the selling of it to us, we deal with the whole gamut there the large and the small.

KK: Um and do most people live around here or do they, how far do they travel to get here, if they have to?

PP: Um I'd say the farthest you're talking about thirty miles, thirty-mile radius. Get much out beyond that you get into the Columbus markets.

KK: ok

PP: Then they go direct to Columbus.

KK: Um have you seen any, I guess, trends like in the past ten years that have changed in terms of the types of people or the number um I guess the number [Noise of the click of papers on desk] of acres they have [noise of click of papers on desk] the scale of their operation that are selling here, have they been I guess fewer farmers or more farmers or more farmers that have more land and fewer that have smaller amounts?

PP: Not any bigger [laughter]

ES: Yeah, we're having less and less farmers that farm more and more acres.

KK: And is that just, because of it's more profitable because the entrance costs are so high?

ES: Equipment, you throw in all the input costs, equipment land, chemicals, all your inputs but you got to spread it over more acres they get a percentage per acre you spread it over more acres you get more.

PP: That's the philosophy I—it doesn't always work [PP, ES and KK: laughter]

KK: Um,

ES: Will this, are you gonna use these, this recording and break it down or are you gonna publish this recording?

KK: Yeah, well, I, I will just—

ES: Ok just, your opening statement I wanted ta, you said late 1900s.

PP: Oh did I say late, it was 1919 is when it was.

ES: Early 1900s

PP: Early 1900s

ES: Yeah, your first statement was late 1900s.

PP: Yeah, I--

ES: 1990, '91 [KK: laughter]

PP: Yeah, yeah

ES: So I just wanted to make sure...

PP: 1919 was when it actually started.

ES: ok

KK: But then more recently, it became, didn't it change names or something?

PP: Yeah about six years ago,

KK: ok

PP: it got larger

KK: Um, I guess I don't have any more specific questions I don't know if there, is there anything else that you can think of that would be important for me to know just about the people you have interactions with and what [Noise of papers on desk] that experience for them is like, sort of how they use the Co-op and how that's, I'm assuming an asset to what they are doing.

PP: Yes, our role has changed a little bit because as the farmers have gotten larger with the internet, it makes it tougher to help them with their input costs, and we're drawing more of them back at this time because its been a tough haul. But as far as selling their commodities, the internet doesn't help them out at all so they have to find a local market to sell it through. The next five years will be interesting to see what kind of changes, it seems like—

KK: yeah

PP: farming changes in five year increments [noise of papers clicking on desk] it, it gets something going on (trails off in a mumble)

KK: And is there anything, I guess specific to Knox County, would you say there's anything that sort of has characterized the like larger scale farming, or is that sort of a trend that, are there trends that are followed throughout the country because this seems to depend on larger market prices, so it does it really matter where you are?

PP: yeah

KK: The effects are the same?

PP: Yeah, you got this, the effects are the same no matter where you're at. Uh, comparison wise between us and going out west its totally different because you got, you talk about large scale farms, and they're huge out there. Our large scale farms around here are 2500-3000 acres out west we're talking 30 and 40000 acres.

KK: whoa

PP: So, it's a big difference, so,

ES: One of the other things around here is that the farmers are having to battle against urban sprawl.

KK: yeah

ES: So land prices, because we're within forty minutes of Columbus basically that's the biggest one. Their fighting against housing, houses goin' up everywhere [Noise of paper clicking on desk]. So I mean that would play into the economics of farming

KK: yeah

ES: big time. [Noise of papers clinking on desk]

KK: And does sort of like more recent, I mean obviously it's happened over time, but more recently has that been more of an extreme?

PP: It's probably the last eight to ten years it's really gotten aggressive. And as are, that's another thing to look at too as are farming community gets older,

KK: um hm

PP: you know the farmers get older, its harder and harder for the kids to take over because they can get so much more money out of it selling it for residential use, so it makes it tough to stay in.

KK: yeah

ES: That would be another trend is that average age of the farmer, is the kids ain't getting' in like they used to.

KK: Is that, do you think that's just because it's not very profitable?

PP: Economics yeah.

ES: Yeah, if you can get 6, 7000 an acre out of your ground to sell it for somebody to build a house on and 1500- 2000 to use it for farming, and its not hard to figure out.

KK: Ah, do you think there's anyone else that you would suggest that I talk to, I mean I'm trying to get into contact with like certain farmers but I didn't know if there was anyone else who sort of came to mind?

PP: Are you looking at mainly farms [noise of phone ringing] that have just corn and beans

KK: I'm actually—

PP: and commodities type stuff, or are you, 'cause there's a lot of specialist stuff that goes on and with localized markets.

KK: yeah

PP: like the vegetable market and stuff like that.

KK: Yeah, I'm trying to do a comparison actually,

PP: ok

KK: I'm, I've interviewed one or two smaller farms as just, there's just a difference between the two so I'm trying to get a hold of some larger farmers to see what their experiences—f

PP: hm

KK: might be like because it seems very much the difference between you know staring up your own business and then um sort of having more of a formula or a way of doing things. (Inaudible sentence) I don't know if you are familiar with like Kenyon's, what we're trying to do with local foods? Um, our dining services and through the Rural Life Center, we're trying to bring more local food into our dining hall and so that's sort of this big thing that we're struggling with because ah, there was a local food council meeting that we had a few weeks ago and um you know, there's a huge rising demand for local food in Knox County and Kenyon feeling a lot of it because we're trying to use it but the supply is just not, it's not being met. And so we were experiencing [paper shuffling] we had growers and buyers and these people who are trying to sort of get at why the supply would not meet the demand and a lot of was that there was some older people and they didn't really, are not really willing to expand their operation and you know that 's a big risk to be taking for—

PP: Have you talked with Troy Cooper?

KK: I haven't, but I've been in touch with him, he has helped me with contacts and stuff.

PP: Ok good because he can help you on that aspect too.

KK: yeah

PP: He's the one that initiated the farm market,

KK: yeah, definitely

ES: I was thinking, uh Paul, uh

PP: Miller

ES: Yeah if he wasn't in Florida, he,

PP: I think he's in Florida.

ES: I think, he's the guy that owns the farm market that does some specialty stuff. If you could get a hold of him, he would be a good contact for that,

PP: yeah

ES: the specialty stuff, he raises sweet corn and strawberries

PP: Strawberries and pumpkins,

ES: and then goes to Florida for three months [ES, PP and KK: Laughter]

KK: Great, what a job! [ES, PP and KK: Laughter]

ES: They pack up the family and they all go to Florida so,

KK: Sounds great!

ES: I don't if you could even get a hold of him now. I think he's in Florida right now.

PP: Yeah, I'm pretty sure he is.

KK: Thank you so much for your time I know you're very busy.

PP: You're welcome.

ES: No problem at all.